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# MARCIA ROBINSON NURTURES WEST LAS VEGAS WITH THE ARTS



When Marcia Robinson grew up in East St. Louis, Ill. amidst prevalent economic hardship and racial tension, opportunities were few for young African Americans to develop themselves as strong individuals, she says. Especially through the arts.

"It was a city that needed hope," she says.

That's just what East St. Louis gained, when internationally renowned dancer and choreographer Katherine Dunham created an arts-based outreach program at schools in Robinson's community.

Robinson and many other high school students — including former gang members — suddenly had a creative outlet, and a role model providing a link to their African heritage.

"The program included African dance, martial arts, poetry, music, theater," Robinson recalls. "When I started experiencing those classes, I knew I was home."

This would shape Robinson's entire storied career, including earning multiple degrees in the performing arts, touring the world with the Platters, and performing in world-famous shows on the Strip.

"If it hadn't been for that program, I wouldn't be who I am," she says.

Now cultural arts supervisor at the West Las Vegas Arts Center (WLVAC) — as well as one of The Smith Center's longest teaching artists — Robinson has one overarching goal.

To provide this same creative resource for Las Vegas youth.

"I've always had a mission, and this is it," she says.

## Las Vegas' Cultural Complexities

Robinson saw many similarities between West Las Vegas and the East St. Louis of her youth, when she first moved to Vegas in the '70s as a professional dancer in "Hallelujah, Hollywood!" at the MGM Grand.

She saw African Americans experiencing hardship and limited opportunities in education and the arts.

"This area was subjected to many decades of segregation," Robinson says. "Artists like Sammy Davis Jr. and Lena Horne performed on the Strip, but they couldn't stay there."

In some ways, she helped push these limitations, including being hired as the first African American dancer at the Sahara.

While she was thrilled to later become a showgirl in "Jubilee!" — at MGM Grand at the time — she was required to use the show's segregated dressing rooms.

Robinson even left the show because of its limited opportunities for African American dancers at that time, she remembers.

She did more than that, soon earning a position leading around the world as backup for the dancers.

### Promoting the Arts and Racial Awareness

After Robinson eventually returned to Las Vegas, teaching dance at the College of Southern Nevada among other jobs, she sprang for the position of cultural supervisor at WLVAC in 1994.

Hired immediately, she knew when the organization opened in 1995 that this was her chance to make change.

"What we do here is really work on self-esteem," Robinson says. "The arts do that. They heal."

Remaining with WLVAC for the past 21 years, her work has impacted the lives of thousands of children and youth in Las Vegas.

Fashioning the program after all she learned from Dunham, Robinson has developed comprehensive arts and cultural classes at WLVAC.

These include ballet, hip-hop, funk, African dance, Afro-Brazilian martial arts, African drumming and more.

Beyond promoting the arts and leadership skills, her programs also focus on African heritage.

"You can't go forward until you know your history," she explains.

One of The Smith Center's first teaching artists, she even incorporates this focus into musical lessons in local classrooms, by teaching young children rhythms and self-esteem-boosting songs as she plays an African drum.

### A Camp for Culture

Robinson touts her greatest accomplishment as helping create the WLVAC's annual Performing & Visual Arts Summer Camp.

An arts-intensive leadership program, this eight-week camp provides local youth with opportunities for civil engagement and social justice projects.

Under Robinson's direction, it has provided classes from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday, every year since 1996.

Thousands of children have attended, Robinson says, many returning year after year.

"The drive is the arts, because the arts are so disciplined and demanding, but it's also about character building and that spirit of never giving up on yourself," Robinson emphasizes. "Then that translates back into home, school and civic activities."

### Widespread Impact

The impact of Robinson's work is clear when she lists the successes of WLVAC participants.

Many have gone on to become nurses, attorneys, performers and theater professionals, including with "Vegas! The Show" at Planet Hollywood, as well as the Las Vegas Contemporary Dance Theater.

"Some of the kids who have been through our programs are now teaching them," Robinson adds.

This has been her long-term goal all along, she notes.

"That's the only way this program will sustain, even when I'm gone – with the young people taking over that leadership," she says. "That's the way it stays in tact and grows and enhances."

To learn more about Smith Center teaching artists, visit [www.thesmithcenter.com/education/teaching-artists/](http://www.thesmithcenter.com/education/teaching-artists/) (<http://www.thesmithcenter.com/education/teaching-artists/>)

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